

The Blue Pacific in Action: Solomon Islands' National Ocean Policy

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Solomon Islands has embraced the regional [Blue Pacific](#) and [Pacific Oceanscape](#) concepts for sustainable oceans management and translated the core principles into national action. The Solomon Islands National Ocean Policy (SINOP; SIG 2018) was launched in November 2018 to safeguard its rich fishing grounds that provide [food security, livelihoods and government revenue](#). It is a useful example of the political and multi-jurisdictional commitment required to apply regional ocean frameworks nationally. This In Brief draws on the insights of senior officials engaged in policy development to provide critical reflections on the challenges ahead for implementation.

The policy was initiated by the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Honourable Mannesah Sogavare, following the 2015 inaugural Oceans Summit in Honiara. It is a response to growing regional ocean pressures (Keen and Hanich 2015) and national challenges — studies predict by 2030 fisheries will not meet local subsistence needs (Bell et al. 2009). Officers from 12 national ministries formed a working group, [Ocean12](#), to develop the SINOP and build on existing policies and sectoral priorities, including those of fisheries, environment, and development planning. The aim was to make an 'integrated effort, not one of competing silos'.¹ With strong regional commitments to ocean governance, it is an opportune time to reflect on Solomon Islands' experience of putting words into action.

Getting the policy wheels turning

The bipartisan, high-level support of the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet gave a powerful impetus for action and cooperation, and was a key to success. Reflecting on the collaborative effort to produce the SINOP, the drafting team members from the lead ministries of fisheries, environment and climate change, and the prime minister's office separately identified other key success elements, summarised in Figure 1.

In 2015, with a clear understanding of policy goals, timelines and high-level expectations, the line agencies took ownership of the process, led by the fisheries and environment portfolios. External technical support from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)/MACBIO program was

valuable; however, the policy was developed and written by local officials/experts to ensure it was context relevant. Agency responsibilities and resource inputs were outlined in an agreed policy development road map that secured consistent personnel engagement and timely expert advice.

Early on, an analysis of existing policies and gaps was conducted to ensure the SINOP would advance policy action, not duplicate it. The Ocean12 identified elements of an 'effective' ocean policy that could later inform key performance criteria for SINOP: a clear legal framework; ongoing capacity development; marine spatial planning; sustainable financing; agreed multi-sectoral decision-making systems; well-defined management jurisdictions; strong compliance regimes; and multi-jurisdictional stakeholder engagement and knowledge brokering. The Ocean12 group also defined key criteria for implementation success, such as customary marine tenure recognition, ocean legislation harmonisation, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Figure 1: Essential elements for SINOP development



Source: The authors.

Broad-based consultations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry, and provincial and local government occurred early: 'We did not want to re-invent the wheel, or have a policy that would later conflict with existing policy and regulations'.² Despite efforts at early and ongoing consultation, integrating policies with different priorities will become challenging in the implementation phase. There was an understanding that, given the complexity of ocean governance, the implementation processes (under the yet-to-be-developed SINOP action plan) would need to evolve and thus be based on adaptive management processes ('a living document') and adjusted as experience was gained and lessons learnt.

Keeping the wheels turning: Challenges ahead

The hard task of developing an agreed action plan remains, and this is where difficult compromises will occur. For example, the priorities of agencies concerned with fisheries, environment, mining, forestry and transport sectors are likely to differ with respect to ocean resource use and conservation. To manage potentially conflicting interests among technical and sectoral agencies, oversight of the SINOP was transferred from the policy development chair in the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade (MFAET). MFAET has established a division for Oceans and Climate Change to oversee SINOP implementation.

Although MFAET is well suited to the national coordinating role, it will still depend on technical agencies for expertise and policy implementation. MFAET could face substantial hurdles as the mediator for competing sectoral interests. There are questions concerning how MFAET will coordinate implementation and ensure political support, line-agency action and appropriate resourcing over the long term. It is not clear whether the new division will duplicate work or draw expertise out of line agencies, which already lack resources.

Compounding this challenge is that the implementation phase requires more engagement with provincial and local governments. This adds to the competing stakeholder interests and management complexity from working across scales — customary and national/provincial/private fisheries jurisdictions and management regimes. About 80 per cent of coastal fisheries are under customary marine tenure, with an increasing number coming under community-based resource management regimes. At the local and provincial levels, there is weak capacity for service delivery, regulation of pressures (especially external ones) and enforcement of regulations. This could impact on policy implementation and collaboration.

Given capacity gaps, there is a strong role for regional agency support, including the Pacific Community (SPC), the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and NGOs (such

as WorldFish). The SINOP will help focus effort; however, there remain challenges in consistent and timely access to regional expertise and resources (Keen et al. 2018) and multi-jurisdictional coordination for locally relevant resource provision (Vince et al. 2017).

The SINOP provides a valuable framework for ocean governance and a template for policy development in other countries, such as Fiji, Kiribati and Vanuatu, trying to improve ocean governance. It is too early to judge how policy will translate into practice, but this participatory and integrative ocean governance process is worthy of monitoring and evaluation.

Notes on authors

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Endnotes

1. Senior Official3 29/5/2019. Interview.
2. Senior Policy Officer1 28/5/2019. Interview.

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